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PIETER A. VERBURG AND THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS A bio-bibliographical account

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1. Academic and historical background

After studying classical languages at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, and spending two semesters at German universities, first in Freiburg and later in Berlin, Pieter Adrianus Verburg (1905-1989) worked in London for some time as a private tutor. There he started his research for a doctoral dissertation on metaphor as an essential feature of language in general, using the extensive library of the British Museum. On his return to the Netherlands, he consulted his former teacher, Professor Hendrik J. Pos (1898-1955), who informed him that a dissertation on this subject was already in preparation. This was the thorough and voluminous study of "The Concept of Metaphor" by Cornelis F. P. Stutterheim (1903-1991), which appeared in 1941; and it was a result of these "special circumstances" as he put it, that Verburg was among the first to publish a review of Stutterheim's work.

In 1938, Verburg, now a Classics teacher at Wageningen, set out on another project. Inspired by Dr Anton J.B.N. Reichling, S.J. (1898-1986), later to become professor of General Linguistics at the Municipal University of Amsterdam, and his dissertation on "The Word. A study of the basis of language and language use" (1935), Verburg undertook an investigation into "The Concept of the Root in Linguistics". During the Second World War he became involved in the resistance movement - where he was known as 'Piet' or '(Piet) van Wijngaarden' - and, as a result, his research activities slackened and eventually came to a standstill. The book was nearly finished, however, when in the turmoil caused by the Battle of Arnhem in 1944, his manuscripts, notes and library were destroyed. Remnants of the lost dissertation are still to be found in an article (Verburg 1951b) dealing with some trends and facts in the development of the theory of language in the period 1800-1940, in the course of which the concept of the root in the works of Franz Bopp (cf. also [VIII] Verburg 1950), Friedrich Schlegel, Jacob Grimm and August Schleicher is briefly discussed.¹

Early in 1944 Verburg unfolded his views about the place to be held by the resistance movement after the liberation; to his mind, the resistance should become the centre of a national spiritual revival. He launched a series of five clandestine pamphlets under the title *De Nieuwe Wijnzak*, in which he developed his ideas further. *De Nieuwe Wijnzak* was meant to be an explicitly national and non-political journal for the resistance movement itself.² For his activities in the

¹ This paper was part of a lecture given at a conference of the Association for Calvinist Philosophy at Amsterdam in January 1944, as Verburg acknowledged in a footnote.

² At the SD, the German *Sicherheitsdienst*, the journal was characterized as "Blatt für Intellektuelle zwecks Zusammenschliessung zur politischen Einheit", as Verburg related to Lydia Winkel (letter of 19 May 1950, Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (NIOD), Amsterdam). For a concise characterization of these brochures cf. Winkel 1989: 164-165.

underground resistance Verburg was awarded the 'Verzetshedenkingskruis' (Cross of the Resistance).

In the papers contributed by him to *De Nieuwe Wijnzak* Verburg stressed among other things the moral obligation to support the victims of war and persecution and the surviving relatives of the members of the resistance. In addition to that, he argued for the foundation of a national organization which was to promote the deepening of the national consciousness. The first initiative resulted in the establishment of the 'Stichting 1940-1945', which still exists (cf. Verburg 1951c; Boucher et al. 1985: 17-19); the second one led to the creation of 'Het Nationaal Instituut', a foundation which in the beginning was generously supported by the Dutch government (cf. for interesting details Verheul & Dankers 1990). Verburg became one of the two directors of the 'Instituut', and sought to put his grand and lofty ideas into the practice of the Dutch post-war society. Among other things, he organized a Congress on the Future of Dutch Culture which was held in Nijmegen in August 1946 (cf. Algra 1946).

Verburg was forced to spend some time in Switzerland from mid-1946 for health reasons; in the meantime the activities of the National Institute stagnated and eventually came to an end.³ It was only in mid-1948 that Verburg resumed his activities as a teacher, and motivated by Anton Reichling decided to start research for another dissertation. That Verburg's *magnum opus* was composed in a relatively short time is a fact which the reader may find [IX] reflected in its style. "Reading the book is [...] not reading a polished and reworked final arrangement of scholarly research but a long and always arresting creative discourse", Shetter (1966: 189) commented on the original Dutch version. On 30 November 1951 Verburg received his doctorate *cum laude* at his alma mater having defended his *Taal en Functionaliteit. Een historisch-critische studie over de opvattingen aangaande de functies der taal vanaf de prae-humanistische philologie van Orleans tot de rationalistische linguïstiek van Bopp*. The year 1957 saw his appointment as a Professor of General Linguistics at the State University of Groningen, which meant the further enlargement of General Linguistics as an autonomous discipline, a broadly based development which was under way in Dutch universities in the 1950s. In the mid-sixties Philosophy of Language was officially added to Verburg's teaching commitment. On the occasion of his retirement, in 1975, he was presented with a Festschrift under the title of *Ut Videam. Contributions to an understanding of linguistics* (Abraham 1975).

It is obvious that *Taal en Functionaliteit* was not the output of research done by a young linguist, but the work of a secondary school teacher in his mid-forties, a widely-read classical scholar who in the course of the 1930s and 1940s had been engaged in writing two other books, and consequently had had the opportunity to develop views of his own, not only on linguistics and its history, but also on matters philosophical.

2. Formative factors in the genesis of *Taal en Functionaliteit*

Verburg's valedictory lecture in the University of Groningen, *Stand en Zin van de Historie der Taaltheorieën* ('The Condition and Purpose of the History of the Theories of Language', 1975), opens with a reference to the courses in general linguistics he had followed when a young student at Amsterdam. These courses were given Hendrik Josephus Pos, a linguist and philosopher who had been appointed professor of general linguistics and classical philology at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam in 1923. In these (unpublished) lectures (1924-1932) the history of linguistics was discussed extensively. Pos made an attempt to delineate the development of western linguistic thought from the discussions of the Greeks to contemporary linguistics.

³ The National Institute was officially closed down on 1 March 1947. Its body of ideas, however, live on in the well-known 'Prins Bernhard Fonds', which stimulates and promotes Dutch cultural life.

Verburg recalled how his teacher followed a dual method in his lectures:

On the one hand, he developed a positive statement of his own theoretical understanding of the essence - or, as it was called then, the idea of language. At the same time, he discussed critically and historically concepts of other linguists, past and present. The two methods were intimately linked. The design and development of his own theory gained depth and perspective by simultaneous confrontation with other basic models and, conversely, in adopting a critical [X] stance, this historical research drew on the essential criteria from his own theoretical principles, or more specifically, on principles of linguistic philosophy.

[Enerzijds ontwikkelde hij thetisch eigen theoretisch inzicht in het wezen - of, zoals dat toen heette: de idee der taal -, anderzijds behandelde hij kritisch-historisch concepten van anderen in verleden en heden. De twee methoden stonden in nauwe correlatie tot elkaar. Opzet en uitbouw van eigen theorie wonnen aan diepte en perspectief door de gelijktijdige confrontatie met andere grondmodellen en, omgekeerd, ontleende dit historisch onderzoek, om kritisch te kunnen wezen, de nodige criteria weer aan eigen theoretische, wil men: taalfilosofische principiën. (Verburg 1975: 3)⁴

Although Verburg did not consider himself one of Pos's disciples in the proper sense of the word, he stated that he had found this "dual method" most instructive, and consequently had sought to apply it in his own academic teachings (ibid.). "My dissertation likewise adopted this double approach, both historical and critical" (*Auch meine Doktorschrift ... war 'zweiseitig' kritisch-historisch*), Verburg noted as late as 1983 (Verburg 1983: 2). Thus it is apparent that Verburg deemed Pos's courses on the history of the theories of language to be most valuable; they may indeed be considered to contain the germs of Verburg's final doctoral dissertation, Pos's biographer argued (Derx (1994: 50), and I would endorse this view. As Verburg himself acknowledged, he actually returned to Pos's lecture notes on several occasions when preparing his book; and as late as September 1951, he wrote a letter to his former teacher requesting more specific information on Knaustinus (1524 - c. 1590) and his *Lingua* (1566), referring to Pos's lectures from the late 1920s which included a discussion of this work.⁵

Touched by a cordial and personal letter Pos had written to him following the defence of his doctoral dissertation Verburg replied that as a student he had been captivated "by your inner critical reservation (*epoche*)". Moreover, as Verburg knew, Pos had "decidedly and resolutely made the choice for the resistance" during the Second World War. Therefore, "your appreciation gives me intense satisfaction".⁶ In 1954, Pos wrote to Verburg that he would [XI] applaud "your possible acting as a 'privaat docent' in the history of (general) linguistics".⁷ The next year, however, saw Pos's untimely death.

⁴ In his 1957 inaugural lecture he had also referred to the approach Pos used in his linguistic and philological lectures.

⁵ For an overview of the contents of Pos's unpublished lectures cf. Noordegraaf 1990: 172-175, Derx 1994: 521-524. Note that Pos himself did not publish very much on the history of linguistics.

⁶ Letter of 15 January 1952, Archief Pos, University Library Amsterdam. Note that Pos had secured him a scholarship so that Verburg could spend the winter semester 1932-1933 in Freiburg i. Br. (van Houten 1989: 5; cf. Verburg 1988: 287).

⁷ Letter of 14 April 1954, private collection. A 'privaat docent' was an external unsalaried lecturer.

It was Anton Reichling, Professor at the Municipal University of Amsterdam, who in 1948 had given Verburg a decisive impetus to write *Taal en Functionaliteit*. Even so, he decided to pursue his study as a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Jacobus Wille (1881-1964), Professor of Dutch Language and Literature at the Vrije Universiteit. Wille, a specialist on the eighteenth century and keenly interested in the history of the study of Dutch, also taught General Linguistics after Pos had left this university to take up the chair of Philosophy at the Municipal University of Amsterdam. Thus, after twenty-odd years Verburg returned to his alma mater, and he did that, I feel, not just for sentimental reasons. The point is the following: the Vrije Universiteit was not a state university or a church university, but a 'free' university, funded by a Society which in the 1950s was still based on rather strictly Calvinist, that is to say Reformed principles which Verburg had always felt a close affinity with. It may be argued then that part of the background to Verburg's studies is to be found in the author's life-long loyalty to these principles. As Verburg related himself in 1983:

At the end of the 1920s two Amsterdam professors, H. Dooyeweerd [(1892-1978)] ... and D.H.T. Vollenhoven [(1894-1977)], advocated a new direction in philosophy. Their philosophy was known as the *Wijsbegeert der Wetsidee* ("Philosophy of the Concept of Law"), known in the U.S.A. and elsewhere as 'Cosmonomics'.

[...] Pos's philosophy of language seemed to me to be confined to a very indefinite description; hence I was all the more deeply impressed by the Cosmonomists' pronounced tendency towards a creative realism which was totally different from mediaeval realism, but as I came to realize only later, bore a certain resemblance to Nicolai Hartmann's realism - though the latter's secularist principles stood in stark contrast to the Christian inspiration of cosmonomic philosophy.

[Ende der zwanziger Jahren vertraten in Amsterdam zwei Professoren eine neue philosophische Richtung: H. Dooyeweerd (...) und D.H.T. Vollenhoven, der als Theologe begonnen hatte. (...). Ihre Philosophie wurde bekannt als "Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee" (Philosophie der Gesetzesidee); in den USA und auch anderswo kam der Name "Cosmonomics" auf.

(...) Die Sprachphilosophie von Pos blieb mir zu sehr in einer unentschiedenen Beschreibung stecken. Desto mehr war ich von den Kosmonomikern [XII] wegen ihrer entschiedenen Wendung zu einem schöpferischen Realismus beeindruckt, der keineswegs dem mitteralterlichen glich, sondern - wie ich freilich erst später erkannte - eine gewisse Ähnlichkeit zu Nicolai Hartmanns Realismus aufwies, dessen Säkularismus jedoch in einer unveröhnlichen Antithese zur christlich inspirierten kosmonomischen Philosophie steht. (Verburg 1983: 2)].

The 'normative' stance the reader will find in *Language and its Functions* and, among other things, the idea that language has its autonomy have to do with the fact that Verburg was an adherent of the "philosophy of the concept of law".⁸ It was Vollenhoven to whom Verburg owed the distinction between 'scientism' and 'practicalism',⁹ and to whose Festschrift of 1951 he contributed a paper on the history of linguistics; in a contribution to a Festschrift for Dooyeweerd (1965) he expounded his own 'delotic' (expository) linguistic theory (cf. Verburg

⁸ For details concerning this type of philosophy, see Dooyeweerd 1954-1958; ²1969.

⁹ The two terms are rendered in the translation of *Taal en Functionaliteit* as 'axiomatic rationalism' and 'pragmatic rationalism' respectively.

1971a and 1983). A member of the Calvinist Association for Philosophy, founded in 1935, Verburg published his first papers on matters linguistic (1941 ff.) in the journal of this association. In a lecture given in 1944, he claimed that only the *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* was able to 'place' certain developments in linguistics; it could give excellent service in elucidating linguistic viewpoints (cf. Verburg 1951b: 30-31). Verburg's philosophical basic views, then, took shape under the influence of the Calvinist philosophy as it began to develop in the early 1930s. It provided him with the framework he needed to analyse the wealth of linguistic-historiographical data. In this sense, too, one might say that not only Pos's lectures but also a wide variety of other "difficult material has for better or worse been passed through the writer's personal mill" (Shetter 1966: 189).

One of his reviewers thought it salutary that "in opposition to the often rather hollow relativistic attitude of the present-day Verburg does not disavow his Calvinist orthodoxy" (de Witte 1954: 514). It goes without saying that not all of his critics shared this type of philosophy of life, but, at any rate, it did not render "the historiography less acceptable to different-minded readers", as Stutterheim (1954a: 219) dryly remarked.¹⁰

3. The intellectual context of *Taal en Functionaliteit*

In the Netherlands at least, Pos's historical-critical approach in his courses on [XIII] general linguistics seems to have been something of a novelty at the time. At other Dutch universities Hermann Paul's (1846-1921) *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* (1880) or introductions to historical-comparative grammar were used as textbooks for general linguistics. Moreover, as it appeared to Verburg (1975: 10), there was never any keen interest in the history of linguistics among the inter-war generation of linguists. He was of the opinion that the histories of linguistics which had appeared since Benfey's voluminous *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft* 1869 had been of slender compass, and in addition gave little more than a recital of facts. It seems that Pos has had similar feelings. Several of his statements reflect this: "A correct assessment of Scaliger's contribution to the development of grammar can only be made when the history of linguistics has been studied methodically", Pos remarked in 1927. A few years later, he spoke about the history of linguistics as having been neglected up to that time (cf. Noordegraaf 1990: 166; 1997: 167).

It should be noted, however, that since the turn of the century the Netherlands have seen a fairly continuous interest in the history of the individual language disciplines, which yielded various articles and dissertations dealing with specific historical aspects of the study of, for instance, Greek, Dutch or French. In addition, one can point to the noted and frequently practised 'introductory' genre, composed in the wake of Berthold Delbrück's (1842-1922) well-known *Einleitung in das Studium der Indogermanischen Sprachen. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Methodik der vergleichenden Sprachforschung* (1880), books offering a concise historical survey, in which the author presents a brief overview of the development of linguistics from Plato's *Cratylus* to the present day, the main point, however, being the development of nineteenth-century comparative historical linguistics.

Be this as it may, in the early 1950s the state of the art of general linguistics was such that Stutterheim, who may be considered an expert in the field at the time, was forced to conclude that in the Netherlands "very few studies were devoted to the history of language theory" (Stutterheim 1954a: 220). One might seriously doubt whether the situation elsewhere was much more favourable, the more when one remembers Aarsleff's dictum on the late 1950s: "In those days there was no interest in the history of linguistics" (Aarsleff 1982: 5). At any rate, in the 1950s

¹⁰ Note, however, that Beth (1953: 94) pointed to the risk of a certain dogmatism, "from which the author, as it appears to me, has not always escaped".

it appears to have been common practice, "a matter of principle, in fact, to regard all investigations and statements made before the time of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Franz Bopp as 'pre-scientific' and utterly unremarkable. There were few exceptions, and, De Mauro (1990: 159) decided, Verburg was one of them. [XIV]

As a matter of fact, it was R.H. Robins's *Ancient and Mediaeval Grammatical Theory in Europe with Particular Reference to Modern Linguistic Doctrine* (1951) and Verburg's *Taal en Functionaliteit* (of the same year) which have been regarded as the first serious linguistic-historiographical studies in the post-war era, to which Arens's 1955 well-known anthology of texts in the history of linguistics may be added. As one of the contemporary reviewers put it: Verburg's study "should be recognized as probably the most important general treatment of the subject since the basic works of Benfey and Steinthal [...] Yet, it is something more than a supplement to earlier studies of theories of language. It marks an advance in the understanding of the place of theories of language in the history of ideas" (Faithfull 1953: 144). In 1974, Hymes considered the importance of this "pioneering, unique study" to lie in its relevance to those engaged in sociolinguistics and other related approaches, wherein functional questions loom large (Hymes 1974: 27).

Following the rapid expansion of linguistic historiography in the last quarter of the twentieth century the present-day reader may ask other questions or deem other issues of more importance. Certain questions and certain issues, however, appear to be perennial, and these about language and its functions are definitely among them.

References and sources of information

N.B. For further details about the life and times of Pieter A. Verburg the reader is particularly referred to Abraham & Stuart 1975, and to Verhaar 1989. References to writings by Verburg himself cited in the text above are omitted here, but included in the list of his works given below.

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1942

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1944

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1945

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[XVII]

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1950

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1951

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1952

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[XVIII]

1953

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